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NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
St. Helena Island

FOLK SONGS ON ST. HELENA ISLAND

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the hymns, they certainly are not sung with anything like the physical and spiritual satisfaction which accompanies the singing of the old spirituals.

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Every church has its choir and choir leader, and some of the churches have a gallery in the rear where the choir sits. Song books of the modern type are purchased for the choir, and new songs are practised patiently in order that they may be introduced in church.² The congregation listens with pride, forbearing to join in unless something very familiar is sung. These songs differ from the old hymns in that they are sung through, without lining, in ordinary tempo and with fair harmonizations, but they, too, fall far short of the spirituals in beauty of execution and in unity of emotional expression.

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It is the spiritual that really gives the Negroes a chance to express themselves in song. Everyone on the island knows the spirituals and loves them. Church services and praise meetings may often open with hymns, but they end with spirituals. In Penn School chapel exercises they are always sung, and they are the favorites in all the other schools on the island. Scarcely a meeting of a club or a society opens without the singing of a spiritual. Standing in the darkness near a small praise house, hearing the mellow voices of the little group within, abandoned for the moment to a spiritual, one realizes anew that this kind of song has an all-important function in Negro life.

St. Helena, being in an isolated culture area, is an excellent laboratory for the study of the spirituals. Here is found little of that racial inferiority complex which for

²I observed that several of the choir songs recently introduced on St. Helena are songs which were common in the small white churches fifteen years ago. This is an interesting fact which bears upon the questions to be discussed later.

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